



USDA Web Standards and Style Guide

Version 2.0

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1) INTRODUCTION

The USDA Web Standards and Style Guide was created to ensure and establish a consistent look and feel for all USDA websites, and to provide a seamless online experience for USDA customers who are potentially traveling across multiple USDA Agencies and Offices during their online sessions. Adherence to the Web Standards and Style Guide is a priority for the Secretary's "One USDA" vision, and assists with the objectives for accomplishing that vision.

Every USDA website contributes to a user's perception of the Department. To ensure a unified web presence, all official USDA websites maintain a visual consistency to help reinforce the USDA's brand identity. As part of an overall branding strategy, all official USDA websites will adopt the standards and style elements outlined in this document.

This guide should be used as a reference for building out your Agency and Office websites, including websites and web pages that support major initiatives and programs. Although consistency is important, this guide recognizes and takes into consideration the unique content and experiences USDA Agency and Office websites offer. The design standards built into USDA.gov were developed to allow flexibility for USDA websites to incorporate the common look and feel while maintaining individual Agency and Office identity.

Throughout this document, you will find references and link to USA.gov. USA.gov is a primary resource for Federal Web Managers as an aggregated source of best practices and information for creating and maintaining Federal websites. Rather than duplicate that information in this Guide, links are provided as those resources are updated regularly.

The USDA Web Standards and Style Guide is part of a larger Style Guide package for the Department. This complete guide includes visual and branding style, writing style, print style, etc.

Always refer to the latest version of this document on USDA Connect:

<http://connections.usda.gov>

It is required that all new public facing USDA websites be vetted through the Office of Communications prior to public launch.

2) FEDERAL LAWS AND REGULATIONS

All USDA websites must adhere to all applicable Federal laws and regulations.

Resources:

<http://www.howto.gov/web-content/requirements-and-best-practices>

3) OVERVIEW OF USDA.GOV

[USDA.gov](http://www.usda.gov) is developed and maintained using IBM RAD V 7.0 for IBM's Websphere Portal V 6.2 environment. It uses standard theme CSS to control the general presentation of the website. USDA.gov's content architecture is backed by an Oracle Database and managed by Oracle's Universal Content Management System.

4) REQUIRED ELEMENTS

a) Masthead

The USDA.gov masthead contains the USDA symbol, signature lockup for the Department title, background image/color, navigation tabs, links, and the USDA Search tool.

In an effort to standardize the masthead across all official USDA websites, all USDA websites must adhere to the new masthead requirements as part of the OneUSDA Strategy. The new requirements include:

- Usage and placement of the USDA symbol
- Removing Agency symbols (unless an exception has been granted)
- Signature lockup for the Department and Agency titles
- Navigation tab placement
- Background

(1) Usage and Placement of the USDA Symbol

The USDA symbol is the single, most visible asset of our organization and a key element of our brand identity.

The USDA symbol can be produced in one or two colors. The official colors for the USDA symbol are dark blue (PMS 288) and dark green (PMS 343). When produced in one color, the symbol should be black or the

dominant dark color used on the website with enough contrast from the background to show proper separation. If a white symbol is used, the background must have enough contrast from the symbol to show proper separation.

Examples:



Two Color

Official Color



PMS 288

PMS 343

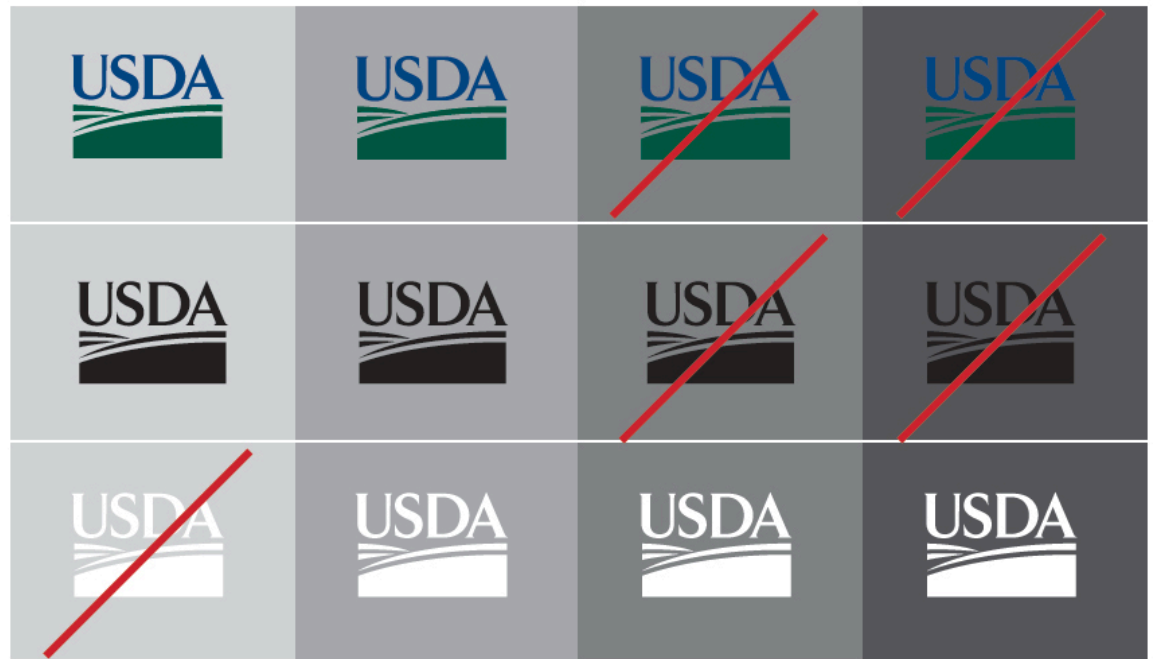


One Color



Reverse

Do not place the symbol on low-contrast background colors. Background colors must provide enough contrast for the symbol to remain highly visible.



(2) Signature Lockup

The new signature lockup requires that the Department title be above the Agency title, and directly to the right of the USDA symbol. The titles must be vertically centered with equal space above and below the combined titles. The USDA symbol and signature lockup should be at the top left corner of your website. The USDA symbol should link back to the homepage of your website.

This variation has been granted an exception for use for web only. All other variations must conform with the USDA Visual Standards Guide or be granted an exception. The USDA Visual Standards Guide can be accessed here:

<http://www.usda.gov/documents/visual-standards-guide-january-2013.pdf>

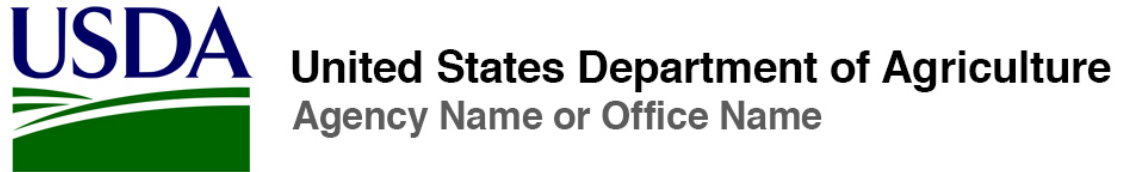
Specifications:

Department title font: Helvetica 16pt, bold

Agency title: Helvetica 14pt, bold

Notes: Agency title can be a shade lighter than Department title with color USDA symbol and black text or a shade darker when using the white symbol and white text.

Acceptable:



Unacceptable variations:



(3) Navigation Tabs

All USDA websites should incorporate a main navigation in a tabbed structure such as the navigation format being utilized on USDA.gov. The tabs should be part of the masthead and repeat on every page within your Agency website. Tabs should contain the primary navigation items your website utilizes based on your information architecture strategies.

The tabbed navigation items should be designed in a tabbed format and placed with a justification to the left in relation to the entire width of the website.

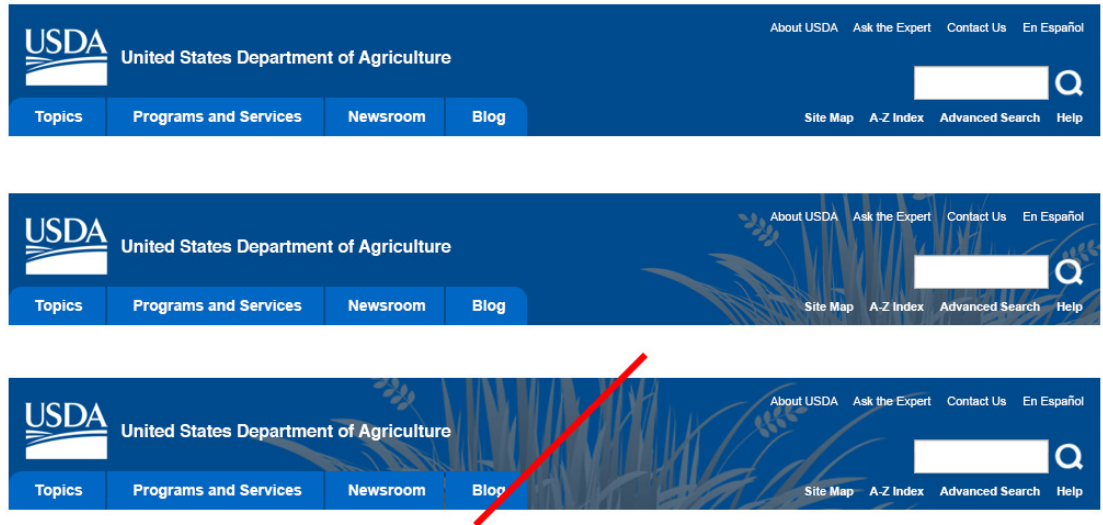
Example:



(4) Background

The background of the masthead directly behind the USDA symbol and signature lockup must be a solid color. If the USDA symbol is color and the signature lockup is black, the background color should be white or a light shade with enough contrast from the symbol and text. If the symbol and text is white, the background should be a dark solid color. You may not use a background image or photo directly behind the USDA symbol and signature lockup, however, you may use a background photo or other design behind other areas of the masthead to the right of the symbol and lockup.

Acceptable and unacceptable:



b) Photo Carousel

Agencies should incorporate a photo carousel area into their homepage. If your Agency does not have the resources for a rotating carousel of photos that can be replaced regularly, a static image can be used, however, static photos should be replaced as often as possible.

The carousel should be placed prominently on your homepage directly under your masthead. The carousel can be placed on the left or right areas of the homepage, however, the carousel should not be centered on the homepage.

c) Social Media Icons

Social media icons should be placed prominently on the homepage near the bottom of the masthead. For specific guidance, please refer to the Digital Style Guide located here:

www.usda.gov/digitalstyleguide

d) Body Content

The structure and content of your Agency or Office homepages should be based off of your Information Architecture strategies and Agency/Office specific content. The Department wants to allow your websites to be tailored to your users and content and defer body content structure to your organization, however, the Office of Communications must approve all new designs.

In general, the body content area of your homepage should closely resemble the structure of USDA.gov. Strong deviations will likely delay the launch of your website.

e) Footer

At a minimum, your website footer should contain the following links:

- [USDA.gov](#)
- [USA.gov](#)
- [Whitehouse.gov](#)
- [FOIA](#)
- [Accessibility Statement](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Non-Discrimination Statement](#)
- [Information Quality](#)
- [Plain Writing](#)

If your Agency does not have specific statements and policies, please link to the Department links on USDA.gov.

f) Sub Pages

Your website subpages should include the homepage masthead, breadcrumbs, social media icons, left navigation column, and footer. These elements should be common on every webpage on your public website.

5) GENERAL STYLE GUIDELINES

a) Fonts

Font selection is at the discretion of your agency. Please ensure your typeface is easily readable and conforms to all Section 508 requirements.

b) Links

Hyperlinks to a website are allowed only if the website is sponsored, supported, or partnered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture; is educational in nature; or is another Government website, including those sites sponsored by State or local governments.

OMB's Information Quality guidelines exclude hyperlinks from the definition of information. This exclusion does not remove agency responsibility to exercise due diligence when determining whether to link externally. Therefore, when an

agency determines external links are necessary for and material to the presentation of agency information or the delivery of services in the proper performance of an agency function, they must take reasonable steps to ensure the presentation is accurate, relevant, timely, and complete.

Agencies must reasonably assure suitable information and service quality, consistent with the level of importance of the information. Reasonable steps include: 1) clearly identifying the limitations inherent in the information dissemination product (e.g., possibility of errors, degree of reliability, and validity) so users are fully aware of the quality and integrity of the information or service, 2) taking reasonable steps to remove the limitations inherent in the information, and 3) reconsidering linking to the information or services. Agency links to commercial organizations or interest groups present special challenges with respect to maintaining agency objectivity and thus must be used judiciously.

External hyperlinks must include a visual cue or icon alerting users that the link is external to USDA. The link should open in a separate window while the USDA webpage remains open.

c) Domain Names

Per OMB guidelines, the use of non-government domains such as .net, .org, .tv, or .com is prohibited. Domain requests, including subdomain requests, will be reviewed by the Office of Communications as part of the Federal Streamlining Initiative. Only after approval is given by OC, and OCIO's Privacy and Security Office, will a domain be eligible for use.

i) Naming Conventions

All USDA domain name requests will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. USDA websites must follow the proper syntax:

For subdomains such as Agency domain names, the syntax is:

Example: www.fsis.usda.gov

For new initiatives, the following syntax is preferred:

Example: www.fsis.usda.gov/newinitiative

In certain cases, the following syntax may be approved:

Example: www.newinitiative.fsis.usda.gov

Agencies must also make every effort to ensure users can access their websites with or without 'www' in the address. This can be accomplished by adding both the www and the non-www to the DNS, one as the A-record, and one as an alias.

For sites that use Akamai, the non-www URL should be DNSed to the Origin web server.

6) ACCESSIBILITY

What It Is

Web accessibility is ensuring that persons with any disability type—including motor, auditory, cognitive, seizure/neurological, and visual impairments—are able to use web content, and ensuring that content is ["perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust."](#)

Why It's Important

In creating an accessible experience, it's essential to understand the needs of each disability type and build agency sites accordingly. Doing so provides the opportunity for all citizens to participate in, and contribute to, the web.

Specific Requirements

To meet the mandates of [Section 508](#), content managers, developers, designers, and all those involved in building government websites, must endeavor to provide all U.S. citizens with timely, usable access to government information. As agencies have embraced the use of social media, more than ever, it's important that our users have the ability to interact with government at every level.

Resources:

<http://www.howto.gov/web-content/accessibility>

<http://www.ocio.usda.gov/policy-directives-records-forms/section-508/usda-section-508-coordination-team>

7) MULTILINGUAL WEBSITES

Providing appropriate access to people with limited English proficiency is one of the requirements for managing Federal websites. You need to determine how much information you need to provide in other languages, based on an assessment of your website visitors.

Resources:

<http://www.howto.gov/web-content/multilingual>

8) RESPONSIVE/MOBILE DESIGN

Responsive web design refers to a fluidly constructed web page layout that scales from handheld device displays to large, high-resolution computer displays using flexible typography, flexible images, fluid grids, and CSS3 media queries

All public facing websites should ensure content is optimized for mobile use, making every attempt to provide a usable, mobile friendly version of their desktop counterparts.

Resources:

<http://mobilegovwiki.howto.gov/responsive+design>

9) WEB-BASED APPLICATIONS

All official public-facing web-based applications should follow the look and feel guidelines established for public facing-websites.

For consideration for an exception, please contact the Office of Communications.

10) SOCIAL MEDIA STANDARDS

a) Overview

USDA uses social media to reach stakeholders quickly and easily, delivering information through a variety of platforms and formats as part of our integrated communications strategy.

b) New Media Policy

New Media Roles and Responsibilities ([DR1495-001](#)) establishes the requirements for the implementation of new media technologies within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Unless otherwise specified, this directive applies to all USDA agencies, employees, contractors, interns, and partners utilizing new media technologies for official USDA purposes.

Agencies must complete the New Media Request Form ([AD-3022](#)) and submit to the Office of Communications for review and approval prior to use.

c) Approved Policy

USDA and Agencies may only establish a presence on social media channels that have been evaluated by the General Services Administration and whose Terms of Service agreements have been reviewed and approved by USDA's Office of General Counsel.

d) Agency vs Enterprise Social Media Tools

Currently, USDA maintains enterprise channels on Facebook, Flickr and Google+. Agencies are permitted to use the channels to share content and engage with stakeholders in coordination with the Office of Communications.

Agencies may pursue the use of other approved channels only after receiving approval as directed in DR1495-001 and AD-3022.

OC will continue to evaluate new tools and platforms as they become available.

11) PLAIN LANGUAGE

Plain language (also called Plain English) is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it. Language that is plain to one set of readers may not be plain to others. Written material is in plain language if your audience can:

- Find what they need;
- Understand what they find; and
- Use what they find to meet their need

There are many writing techniques that can help you achieve this goal. Among the most common are:

- Logical organization with the reader in mind
- "You" and other pronouns
- Active voice
- Short sentences
- Common, everyday words
- Easy-to-read design features

No one technique defines plain language. Rather, plain language is defined by results—it is easy to read, understand, and use.

Resources:

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

http://usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=PLAIN_WRITING

12) USABILITY

In general, usability refers to how well users can learn and use a product to achieve their goals and how satisfied they are with that process.

A key methodology for carrying out usability is called User-Centered Design.

Usability measures the quality of a user's experience when interacting with a product or system—whether a Web site, a software application, mobile technology, or any user-operated device.

It is important to realize that usability is not a single, one-dimensional property of a user interface. Usability is a combination of factors including:

- **Ease of learning** – How fast can a user who has never seen the user interface before learn it sufficiently well to accomplish basic tasks?
- **Efficiency of use** – Once an experienced user has learned to use the system, how fast can he or she accomplish tasks?
- **Memorability** – If a user has used the system before, can he or she remember enough to use it effectively the next time or does the user have to start over again learning everything?
- **Error frequency and severity** – How often do users make errors while using the system, how serious are these errors, and how do users recover from these errors?
- **Subjective satisfaction** – How much does the user *like* using the system?

<http://www.howto.gov/web-content/usability>

13) SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Creating search-friendly web pages is called organic or free search engine optimization, meaning that web pages contain the details search engines

seek, putting them up farther in search results without the web owner having to pay for this ranking.

Resources:

<http://www.howto.gov/web-content/search>

14) RECORDS MANAGEMENT

You are required to meet records management requirements by implementing [OMB Circular A-130](#) and guidance from the National Archives and Records Administration, including appropriate management of social media records. See [36 Code of Federal Regulations \(CFR\), Parts 1220-1238](#).

Resources:

<http://www.howto.gov/web-content/requirements-and-best-practices/omb-policies/records>

15) REFERENCES

USDA Digital Style Guide

www.usda.gov/digitalstyleguide

USDA Visual Standards Guide

<http://www.usda.gov/documents/visual-standards-guide-january-2013.pdf>

New Media Policy

<http://www.ocio.usda.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2012/DR1495-001.htm>

16) CONTACT

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